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(71) Applicant
Barcrest Limited (United Kingdom),
Margaret Street, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire
OL7 0QQ

(72) Inventor
John Laurence Wain

(74) Agent and/or Address for Service
Sydney E M'Caw & Co.,
41-51 Royal Exchange, Cross Street, Manchester
M2 7BD

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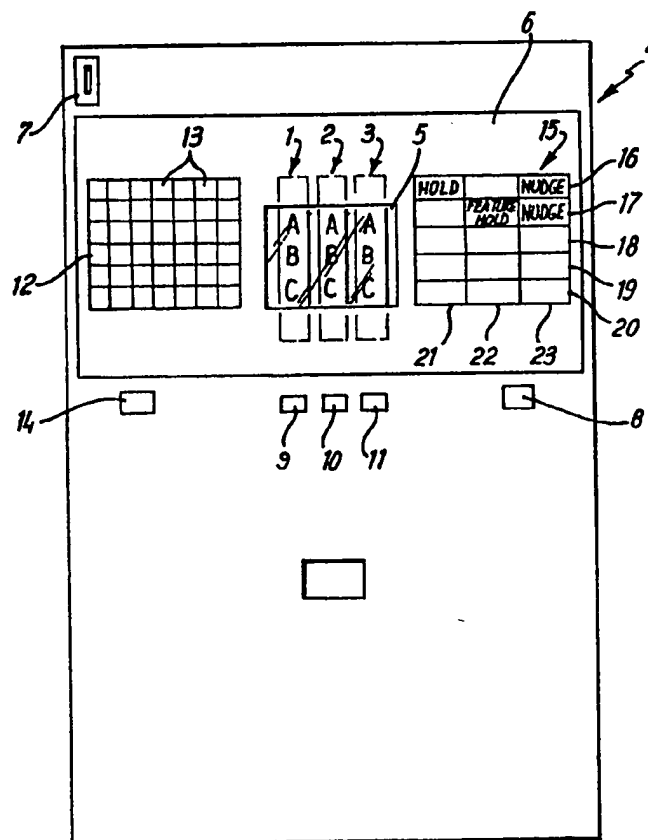
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(54) **Entertainment machines**

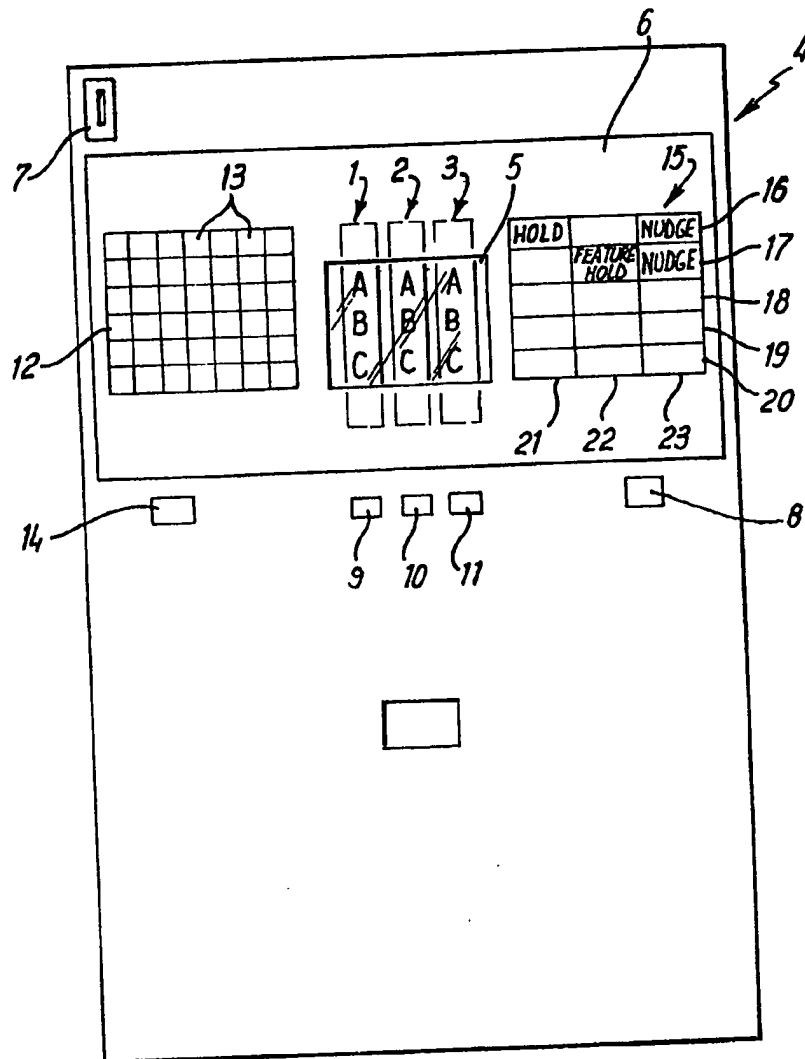
(57) A coin-operated entertainment machine, such as a fruit machine, can be used to play games involving the production of displayed combinations of symbols (1,2,3). Supplementary playing features are made available in some games, for example, fruit machine hold, nudge and gamble features. A forecast device, such as an illuminated display panel (15), is provided to indicate the availability of supplementary playing features in forthcoming games.



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SPECIFICATION

Entertainment machines

5 This invention relates to coin- (or token-) operated entertainment machines and is particularly although not exclusively concerned with fruit machines.

10 It is common practice to provide a fruit machine with one or more supplementary game features (e.g. "nudge", "hold" and "gamble" features) which are made available to the player on a random basis at the end or start of a game.

15 These supplementary features enhance playing interest since they add variety and also provide an opportunity for the player to influence the outcome of the game.

20 An object of the present invention is to promote further the interest value of supplementary game features.

25 According to the invention therefore there is provided a coin- or token-operated entertainment machine operable to play games involving the production of displayed combinations of symbols, supplementary playing features of at least one kind being made available in at least some games, characterised in that the machine incorporates a forecast device arranged to indicate the availability of at least one kind of playing feature in at least one forthcoming game.

30 With this arrangement, considerable playing interest can be derived from the fact that the player is provided with prior knowledge of the availability of supplementary game features. This has an anticipatory or encouraging effect and, as appropriate, the player can use the prior knowledge to devise a game-playing strategy.

35 Most preferably, the machine is a fruit machine. That is, the displayed combination of symbols is selected at random from say three or four sets of symbols (using rotatable reels, a vdu display simulating rotatable reels, an array of squares which can be selectively illuminated, or the like), and a win detecting device is provided to give a win indication in the event that the selected combination is of a predetermined winning nature.

40 In this context the said supplementary features may comprise one or more of: a "nudge" feature which enables the player to change the displayed symbol combination at the end of a game e.g. by stepwise movement of one or more reels; a "hold" feature which enables the player to hold one or more displayed symbols at the start of a game against change during the game; a "gamble" feature which enables the player to gamble an attained award following production of a winning combination in an attempt to increase the value of the award. The invention is not of course intended to be restricted to these features and any other suitable feature or combination of features may be provided.

70 "Feature hold" (which permits holding of features (e.g. consolation awards) selected on a supplementary selection device), and "autonudge" (as described in Patent Specification 2092797) are further possibilities.

75 The said forecast device may provide information on any suitable number of forthcoming games, say from one to five. Correspondingly, it will be appreciated that the machine is required to predetermine those features which will be made available in the same number of forthcoming games and, preferably, this is effected on a random basis. Although the availability of such features is predetermined it is to be understood that changes can be effected under the influence of the machine and/or under the influence of the player as appropriate. Thus, for example, on occasions (as selected on a predetermined or random basis) the forecast features may be changed or "scrambled" (in a predetermined or random manner).

80 The forecast information may be displayed to the player in any suitable manner. For example the machine may have a panel with an array of identified zones which are illuminated to indicate the availability of the features. Alternatively a vdu display may be used.

85 Preferably the arrangement is such that the forecast device only provides forecast information for those games for which coins (or tokens) of the appropriate value have already been credited by the machine. Thus, the arrangement may be such that, as games are played, the number of games for which forecast information is given, decreases in correspondence with reduction in credit.

90 The invention will now be described further by way of example only and with reference to the accompanying drawing which is a diagrammatic front view of one form of an entertainment machine according to the invention.

95 The machine shown in the drawing is a fruit machine having three reels 1, 2, 3 which are rotatable within a housing 4 behind a window 5 in a front panel 6.

100 Each reel 1, 2, 3 has pictures of fruit (designated A, B, C) at 20 positions around its periphery, and rotation of each reel is effected and also arrested by a microprocessor-controlled stepping motor, the arrangement being such that the reel always comes to rest in precise registration with the window. Each stopping position is identified by the microprocessor control circuitry in known manner.

105 In use, the machine is actuated by a player by insertion of one or more coins or tokens into a coin mechanism 7 and a starter button 8 is pressed to cause the three reels 1, 2, 3 to rotate for different random periods of time before coming to rest. When the reels 1, 2, 3 come to rest, their stopping positions are identified and a win indication is produced in

the event that the identified stopping positions correspond to the display of a predetermined winning combination of fruit (say three fruit of the same kind) at predetermined positions in the window 5 (e.g. on a horizontal win line passing through the middle of three displayed fruit for each reel).

There is a respective player-operable button 9, 10, 11 for each reel beneath the window 5, for "hold" and "nudge" features. At the start of some games, as selected on a random basis, the buttons 9-11 are made available for hold operation and when so operated by the player the or each pertaining reel 1, 2, 3 is held against rotation during the course of the ensuing game. At the end of some games, as selected on a random basis, the buttons 9-11 are made available for nudge operation and when so operated by the player the or each pertaining reel 1-3 is indexed through a number of steps (i.e. stopping positions) as determined by the action taken by the player and within the limits of a total permitted number of nudge steps. Alternatively a player-initiated automatic nudge facility (which automatically nudges the reels through the optimum number of steps within the imposed limits) may be provided as described in Patent Specification 2092797.

Moreover, the machine has a translucent features panel 12 printed with feature squares 13. During play of some or all games the feature squares 13 are illuminated (by lamps within the housing behind the panel) on a random basis or in predetermined sequence and the outcome of the game may be modified in correspondence with the information contained on the last illuminated square. In this way an attained win can be increased in value or a consolation award made or the like. A feature hold button 14 is provided and when made available at the start of a game this can be operated by the player to hold the illuminated feature square 13 (and to hold the corresponding feature function) against change during the ensuing game.

The machine further has a translucent forecast panel 15 printed with five horizontal rows 16-20 of squares (identified from top to bottom: This game, Next game, Third game, Fourth game, Fifth game). There are three squares in each row and these define collectively three vertical columns 21, 22, 23 identified respectively hold, feature hold and nudge.

In the case where the player has inserted sufficient coins (or tokens) into the machine to provide credit for one game only, the forecast panel 15 is actuated to display at the start of the game, only information relating to the availability of the hold, feature hold and nudge facilities for that game. That is, the appropriate square or squares are illuminated on the "this game" row (16) only.

In the case where the player has credit for more than one game, the appropriate number

of rows of squares are illuminated to give forecast information. In correspondence with this it will be appreciated that the machine determines in advance for all credited games the game features which are to be made available. As the games are played, the forecast information is shifted upwardly, i.e. the pattern of illuminated squares on the "next game" row (17) moves up to the "this game" row (16) and so on. As this happens, the player has the opportunity of inserting further coins (or tokens) to increase his credit and thereby obtain forecast information for further forthcoming games.

On occasions, on a random basis, the displayed forecast information (and the corresponding feature functions) are changed or scrambled. This may involve random flashing of the lamps behind the squares of the panel 15 or interchange of illuminated squares in a predetermined pattern.

With the arrangement so far described the machine can play games, each such game comprising a main playing routine, in which a displayed combination is randomly selected with the rotatable reels 1-3, and (when made available) one or more supplementary playing routines involving operation of switches 9-11, 14 by the player before or after the main playing routine to influence the selection of the displayed combination (i.e. by "holding" or "nudging" one or more reels) and/or to influence the outcome of the game following production of the displayed combination (i.e. by "holding" selected features indicated on the panel 12). The forecast panel 15 provides advance information of the availability of the supplementary playing routines and thereby gives increased player interest.

It is, however, to be understood that the invention is not intended to be restricted to the details of the above described embodiment. In particular, the forecast panel 15 is not restricted in application to supplementary game features of the kind involving player-operable controls. Alternatively or additionally it is possible to use the forecast panel 15 in relation to supplementary games features which are automatically introduced and implemented.

CLAIMS

1. A coin- or token-operated entertainment machine operable to play games involving the production of displayed combinations of symbols, supplementary playing features of at least one kind being made available in at least some games, characterised in that the machine incorporates a forecast device arranged to indicate the availability of at least one kind of playing feature in at least one forthcoming game.

2. A machine according to claim 1, which is a fruit machine wherein the displayed combination of symbols is selected at random

from sets thereof, and a win detecting device is provided to give a win indication in the event that the selected combination is of a predetermined winning nature.

- 5 3. A machine according to claim 2, wherein the said supplementary features comprise one or more of a nudge feature which enables the player to change the displayed symbol combination at the end of a game, a
10 hold feature which enables the player to hold one or more displayed symbols at the start of a game against change during the game, a gamble feature which enables the player to gamble an attained award following production
15 of a winning combination in an attempt to increase the value of the award.

4. A machine according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the forecast device is operable to provide information on a plurality
20 of forthcoming games, the machine being arranged, correspondingly, to predetermine those features which will be made available in the same number of forthcoming games.

5. A machine according to claim 4,
25 wherein provision is made for changing the forecast features on occasions.

6. A machine according to any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein the machine has a panel with an array of identified zones which
30 are illuminated to indicate the availability of the forecast features.

7. A machine according to any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein the forecast device only provides forecast information for those
35 games for which coins (or tokens) of the appropriate value have already been credited by the machine.

8. A machine according to claim 1, substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to and as illustrated in the accompanying
40 drawings.